

What are the Information Needs of Communities & Citizens? Most of our area towns practice "pure" democracy--they make major spending and policy decisions by town meeting vote. Most people come to these once or twice-a-year gatherings with only a vague and shallow idea of what is behind the articles they are voting on, because the local media doesn't cover town governments on an ongoing basis. This means those with purely political motives can easily whip up anger and spread misinformation over proposals they oppose and get them shot down with no substantive discussion taking place. The week-to-week functions of town boards are by and large ignored by local commercial media unless there's a scandal or controversy. This kind of sensationalistic coverage serves no one well. Example: We have several casinos proposed for what is a predominantly a rural area, and there has been to date no close examination of the issues surrounding these proposals for the benefit of the residents who will be most affected should any of these initiatives !

pass, a fact that casino operators are taking clear advantage of. We clearly need more ongoing, substantive public discussion of local policy, economic, and public safety issues, and the local media outlets listed below present at best a confusing patchwork quilt of coverage--with many, many holes.

How is Commercial Media Serving Your Community?

We have a daily paper of record which has cut its regional bureaus in half since 2004; our local issues are only covered in its pages once every two weeks or so, or whenever some local scandal erupts. The second daily in the area doesn't cover our town at all. There are two free weeklies, staffed mainly by people right out of journalism school because they don't pay a living wage, but they cover five or six towns apiece with a staff of one full-time reporter and a small group of stringers apiece and the content is sometimes less than substantive. The major Springfield and Boston television ignores us altogether, while the sole Worcester cable commercial station mentions us only when some crime, disaster or controversy happens. Ditto for the commercial web outlets sponsored by these more traditional media.

What is the State of Noncommercial, Nonprofit, and Public Media?

There are a number of town local cable access stations in our area but each one can only be accessed by citizens of their individual towns, and the cable companies, although compelled by their contracts with each town to contribute money for these stations, make the towns fight tooth and nail for every dime they get--and then the cost of those "grants" are passed on to the cable customers. We have an incipient full-power nonprofit station (Quaboag Public Radio) that has just received its FCC construction license but has yet to go on-air. We have a town newsletter that is supported by grants and the dedication of volunteers. The nearest operating full-power NPR affiliate is in Worcester and has no news division of its own; the second closest 50 miles away has a news staff of three but doesn't cover our area. The smaller nonprofit radio stations dotting the immediate area are all run by religious conglomerates or local church denominations and function by and large as evangeli!

sm tools or conservative/right-wing propaganda outlets. There are no real local news websites except those described above (although I'm trying to get one started in my town, and it will take a long time to get readership.) We are a desert, information-wise, between too major metropolitan areas and to them we may as well not exist.

What is the Impact of the Internet and Mobile Information?

There are a few small blogs in the area but some have not been updated in more than two years while others are solely platforms for one person to rail against their town governments about their pet peeves without adhering to journalistic standards. The major Boston and Springfield media outlets all have an internet presence but they have the same problems as listed in the commercial media portion of this survey above--they don't or won't commit the resources to cover smaller communities, especially those past the Route 495 beltway, or at best west of Worcester. The local papers either currently make their web content viewable only to subscribers via password or are planning to do so in whole or in part. Our high-speed cable provider sucks and has a monopoly on services under state law, so dissatisfied subscribers have nowhere else to go. The country needs universal high-speed internet, paid for by the government; more public funds for existing nonprofit radio and television;!

and more grant money available for nonprofit media startups, both online and broadcast. This will encourage the establishment of local nonprofit broadcast outlets, especially radio, and will encourage more towns to make use of the internet since more people will have access to it without onerous commercial monthly subscriber fees.